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## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MYSTICISM.\*

To study this subject in all its aspects would be a matter of extreme complexity; it would lead us into theology, into literature, into history, into the physical and moral sciences. We should be obliged, in particular, to examine it from the point of view of physiology and pathology, as well as from that of psychological introspection. But division of labor has its place, even in knowledge, and it is no doubt possible, without considering the organic manifestations of mysticism, to select some features of it which will be interesting and profitable.

Some of the mystics themselves were great psychologists. The observation of the inner life has always been their chief concern. So we must pay great attention to the discoveries which they held themselves to have made in the region of the human soul, unless they are all to be dismissed as pathological.

The mystics indeed are sometimes represented simply as pathological. In that case, we could certainly not treat of mysticism apart from its physiological and pathological side; but, taking the word in its broad and historical sense, it does not seem that one is justified in classifying the mystics directly among the diseased.

The attempt has been made to prove that Socrates was a degenerate because of a certain leaning towards mysticism. Nothing could be more contrary to the fact. His was a healthy and strong spirit, tireless in argument, inculcating and practicing self-control above all things. And what shall we say of Francis of Assisi, St. Bernard, Spinoza, Schleiermacher, in all of whom the mystical side was great or even preponderating: were they also pathological? Some will instance Pascal, and the abyss which he always saw at his side, and the accident at Neuilly Bridge which had affected his brain; but these little stories are without foundation, and the critical investigation of the present day has ruled them out of his biography. As for his trance of November 23d, 1664, recorded by him in a

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\* Translated from the French original by Miss Crum.

literary fragment, which may be called his memoir, this phenomenon, partly a physiological one, was not a cause but an effect of mysticism. His thought, having been concentrated for months upon one object, naturally produced in his organism corresponding sensations. Something, not similar but analogous, happened to Descartes, the sanest of men.

## I.

Mysticism consists, according to a fine definition which I find in Plotinus, in seeing with the eyes shut ( *μύσαντα ὄψιν* ), in seeing with the eyes of the soul, while the bodily eyes are closed. It manifests itself most essentially in what is called ecstasy, a state in which, all communication with the outer world being broken, the soul feels herself in communication with an internal object which is the infinite being, God.

But we should form an incomplete idea of mysticism if we regarded it as consisting entirely in this phenomenon, which is only its culminating point. Mysticism is a life, a movement, a development with a definite character and direction. The different phases of this development do not, indeed, manifest themselves with equal clearness in all the mystics: nevertheless it is possible, by comparing the narratives of the greatest of them, to form a sufficiently clear and consistent idea of the general features of mystical development in its normal and complete form. I shall try, as far as it is possible to reduce life to formulas, to mark the different stages of this development.

The starting point, the first moment, is a state of the soul which it is difficult to define, but which is characterized well enough by the German word *Sehnsucht*. It is a state of desire, vague and disturbed, very real, and liable to be very intense as a passion of the soul; very indeterminate, or rather very inexplicable, as regards both its object and its cause. It is an aspiration towards an unknown object, towards a good which the heart imperatively demands, and which the mind cannot conceive. Such a state may indeed be found in men of very different characters, and may have very different degrees of

signification. In the mystic it is profound and lasting; it works in the soul, which gradually forms for itself an idea of the object of its aspiration. This revelation is not direct. But, more or less suddenly, according to the individual experience, the things amongst which we live, things about which we thought we had formed stable judgments, appear to us in another light. The things that charmed us lose their color; the things we had admired seem debased; our dearest affections cease to fill our heart. The things of the world no longer hold us; each of them now awakens in us the idea of its opposite. In all the objects presented to our sight we see only the distortion, the empty image, wan and dead, of the living idea, perfect and definite, which sensible realities are powerless to express. We conceive, as the supreme object of our desires, the infinite, the eternal, the perfect—God. And, reflecting upon the feeling which was the starting point of this conception, we can understand why the desire was tinged with disquiet, why we could neither escape from this feeling nor satisfy it. It was the still unconscious idea of an infinite object, which was creating an indefinable dissatisfaction in our consciousness with regard to the possession of all finite objects.

It is in the passing of this idea from the region of the unconscious to that of distinct consciousness that the first phase of mystical development consists.

The second phase is an effort to transform oneself from within in conformity with this idea. This effort necessarily takes the form of a contest. For, indeed, to all those objects which surround us, and which we now consider unworthy of us, we are attached by countless ties; we are used to them, they are our life, our heart is in them. And now we know that we ought not to love them, that God alone is the worthy object of the human soul. But an idea is not a feeling; and the problem which presents itself is just that of converting the idea into feeling. Now begins an internal conflict between that which we wish to be and that which we are, between an idea which is still an abstraction, and feelings which, although henceforth condemned by the intelligence, have as yet lost nothing of their reality and force.

The means which the mystic employs for working upon his feelings and transforming them are purification and asceticism : *κάθαρσις* and *ἀσκησις*. Bodily mortification must, in his opinion, free the soul and render her obedient to the dictates of the intelligence.

The struggle thus begun becomes more and more painful as the strength of our attachment to the world reveals itself through the very efforts we make to break it. At first we had thought we were masters of ourselves; that it sufficed to resolve. Soon we understand that inertia itself is a resisting power, a force in which our past actions are stored up, and remain; and the more we struggle, the more distant and difficult does victory appear.

Thus in the first stage of its progress the soul suffers more and more, and endures all the temptations of discouragement. But soon, where a firm faith has persevered, the desired change begins to take place and the pain of the struggle is mingled with satisfaction and with hope. The soul suffers gladly, feeling that her sufferings are fruitful, and lead to a state of peace and joy. And gradually the joy penetrates and transfigures the suffering, and frees itself from it, triumphant. That is the second moment.

The third is what is called ecstasy; it is the abrupt instantaneous change from a life which is temporal, changing, composite, imperfect, to a life which does not change, which is one, simple, eternal, perfect and divine. Ecstasy is the reunion of the soul with her object. Nothing any longer acts as an intermediary between them; she sees, touches, possesses; she is merged in her object; they are one. This is no longer faith, which believes without seeing; it is more even than knowledge, which holds the object only through its idea; it is a perfect union, in which the soul is conscious of a full existence, through the very act of self-surrender and self-renunciation; for that to which she has now surrendered is being and life itself.

The feeling of this union is love. Love alone has this virtue of uniting persons without absorbing one in the other, but, on the contrary, increasing their reality and their consciousness of themselves as persons. Further, to the love which ex-

presses the union of the soul with its object, there is added the intuition of the intelligence: light, pure and complete; certainly, in the full sense of the word. And love and light engender beatitude in the soul—perfect joy in the harmony and in the presentiment of eternity. Such is the third stage.

But in a finite and temporal creature, ecstasy can be but an accident. Ordinary life soon begins again, with its movement and its imperfection, and with its struggles and its deceptive victories. Yet the remembrance of things seen in the moment of ecstasy will henceforth be, for the mystic, the ruling principle of thought and life.

In the light of this vision of truth he now looks into himself and examines his former life, which seems to him quite other than it appeared during the struggle which preceded his conversion. Then, he had thought to raise himself to God, of himself and by himself. And the order in which the states of his soul seemed to arise was: first, the idea; second, feeling; third, action. But that was an illusion of the immediate consciousness; in reality, all progress comes from above, and it is the perfect which itself creates in us the very disposition to desire and seek it. Goethe said: "Das Vollkommene muss uns erst stimmen und uns nach und nach zu sich hinauf heben." ("That which is perfect must first attune us, and then gradually draw us up to itself.") These words admirably express the mystic's point of view. The idea does not engender the feeling, but is rather its translation into clear consciousness. And the feeling itself, the desire, the aspiration, is not the principle of the possession or of its culminating act. It is because the soul is already, in the depth of its being, in some measure united to its object, that it aspires to a fuller union, a union which can be known and seen and enjoyed. "Be comforted," says Jesus Christ to Pascal, "thou wouldst not seek me if thou hadst not already found me."

Thus the true order of events, the order in which they arise, is the inverse of the order in which they appear to the immediate consciousness. First there is action, the union of the soul with God; then comes feeling, that is to say, the desire of the soul to persevere in that union, or to restore it to its integrity,

if it has been diminished; lastly, the abstract idea, the representation, or objective projection, in the mirror of the intelligence, of this feeling which is the inner spring of the soul. The end, the object of our effort, is its consummation only because it is its principle.

Looking back from this point of view upon the state of bewilderment in which he was at first, the mystic takes quite another view of suffering than that of the natural man. The natural man, judging of the disease by the sufferings, tries to rid himself of the latter, and if in any way whatsoever he succeeds in doing so, he thinks himself cured. But in reality he was ill before he had perceived it. It was indeed the latent character of the illness which made it so serious; and that which, in our aversion to suffering, we call disorder or disease, is, on the contrary, the effort of the healthy part of ourselves, the effort of the essential in us, to which we hold, to throw off and eliminate the germs of destruction which were accumulating within. What we call illness is, in reality, a salutary crisis, a first step towards recovery. And far from its being the consciousness of our illness which causes us to seek the remedy, it is in recovering from a disease that we gradually find out its existence, its nature and its extent. The evil is recognized as evil only through its resistance to the good which fights against it.

Such is the fourth phase; a return upon the former life, and a new orientation as regards both judgment and conduct.

There remains the fifth and last phase. This supernatural life, the presentiment of which has been awakened within the mystic, must be developed by him and realized in all its fulness.

In this respect the mystics are divided, it would seem, into two classes. A certain number devote themselves exclusively to the contemplation of perfect being, and from henceforth consider the earthly life and the things of time only as obstacles which separate them from the object of their desire; henceforth they are strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Their constant care is to die to the world from that very hour. They represent what may be called ascetic mysticism. But there is

another mysticism which may be called joyous, and which consists in transfiguring the natural life and infusing into it the supernatural principle. For a Francis of Assisi, for a Jacob Boehme, the world is only evil when seen through the eye of the flesh. But it is given to the spirit to see it as God Himself sees it; and how could that which God looks upon be altogether evil and corrupt? So far from being obliged to condemn himself to flee from the world, to feel for it only contempt and horror, the mystic may see in the union of the soul with God the very principle which rehabilitates the world, and makes its use innocent and salutary. *Omnia sana sanis.*

Thus, by divers ways, the mystics move towards their goal, the infinite enlargement of that consciousness wherein the natural man fancied himself shut in, and as it were imprisoned. Man is born a separate individual; he wants to become a person in the true sense. He will succeed by returning to the source of all personality, the spirit, and by drawing his own life from this universal principle. And in loving God he will love the whole creation, for it is through our love for one another that we come to know our love for God. This power which self-conscious spirits possess, of breaking through the material envelope and becoming mutually interpenetrable; this faculty by which beings which seemed strangers to one another, understand one another, truly love one another, and live a common life, without doing away with their own distinctive individuality; this, together with union with God as principle of this universal communion, constitutes the idea which governs the mystic life.

"Dann geht die Seelenkraft dir auf,  
Wie spricht ein Geist zum andern Geist."

"Then rises the power of the soul within thee, as spirit answering to spirit."

It is this direct communication of spirits through the veil of the flesh, under the action of God, which is the mystic's dream. Pascal has well expressed the idea in these words, which, if I am not mistaken, are at once very beautiful and



very rich in meaning: "All is one; the one is the other, as in the Three Persons." The Christian Trinity is just the expression of this essentially personal union, where there is distinction of conscious selves within a close and perfect oneness.

## II.

Such are, according to the principal representatives of mysticism, the general characteristics of mystical life and doctrine. In trying to determine its signification and value, it is interesting to put oneself first at the mystic's own point of view. An investigation conducted upon this principle would constitute what may be called the subjective psychology of mysticism.

One of the first features which such a study would reveal is the remarkable way in which the mystics conceive of internal observation, or introspection. By this form of conscious activity is often understood an observation analogous to external observation, whose aim is to grasp, in the form in which they are immediately given, the facts of consciousness, as well as the relations manifested in them. Mystical observation is not of this kind; it is not content with viewing the surface of the soul, but would go much deeper. The mystic thinks that by the effort of reflection he can penetrate ever farther into his inmost being. He would fain reach its lowest depths. For him, action is only the manifestation of real being, and real being eludes the superficial consciousness which suffices for our practical, and even our scientific activity. There are more things in our soul than our philosophy dreams of. There are hidden faults which, unbeknown to ourselves, incline us to evil; there are indestructible and divine forces, which enable us to rise after every fall. In a word, beneath the conscious there is the unconscious, the true ground of our being, more and more accessible to a consciousness which methodically and with increasing intensity, searches out the ultimate causes of our thoughts and the most secret springs of our actions.

A second process of psychological method is likewise brought to notice by the practice of the mystics; this is, experimenta-

tion from within. The possibility of this operation has been questioned. The whole of the mystical life is nothing but a series of experiments. The general problem is, given the abstract idea of certain feelings, of certain states of the soul, to make these feelings, these states, a reality in the soul. "You wait for faith to come," cries Pascal, "before you will forsake pleasures. But I tell you, you would soon have faith if you forsook pleasures. It is for you to begin. You can quite well forsake pleasures, and see whether what I say is true." According to the ordinary way of thinking, we are masters of our actions to a certain extent, but scarcely of our feelings, and cannot, for example, compel our love; but the mystic, who values actions only in as far as they give expression to feelings, sets himself, with the aid of such moral and physical conditions as we can control, to stir up within himself those feelings which nourish the true life of the soul.

If we pass on from the examination of methods to that of results, we are at once struck by the relation which the mystic establishes between knowledge and feeling, or action. It is the latter which is primitive; knowledge is dependent and comes afterwards. *Tantum intelligitur Deus quantum diligitur*. Action reveals power; love is vision. It is the form of our activity which determines the point of view and the range of our intelligence, for the principles of the latter are but the results of our practical experiments. We see only what we know; we know only what we do.

This conception of the origin of knowledge leads the mystic to transform, in a general way, the apparent relations of outwardness and transcendence into relations of inwardness and immanence. The notion of God, as Creator and Lord, to whom the world cries out from the depths of its nothingness, resolves itself into the conception of grace, or divine action present within ourselves; and grace becomes, by degrees, not only the foundation, the law of our liberty, but that liberty itself, perceived, or divined, as an original spontaneity, superior to all the temporal conditions, which seem to determine it. In all things, the determined, the finite, the given reality is but the imperfect and fugitive symbol of the infinite and the ideal.

Moreover the liberty which the mystic thus comes to look upon as the true origin of action and of knowledge, could not be, in his eyes, the mere abstract form of a principle itself indeterminate. His inmost experience feels in it the infinite generosity of love, for real love has no need of motives, of conditions, in order to give and devote itself. It does not render like for like, nor wait for our deserving before it spends itself. It gives out of the abundance of the heart—through pure goodness, not weighing nor counting. This love, not of oneself in others, but of others in oneself, love full and fruitful in which the self realizes itself in giving itself, is, in the opinion of the mystic, the real motive power of the universe. "The eternal virgin," says Goethe (in beautiful lines often made ridiculous in translation), "the love of devotion and sacrifice, which is the divine essence of the feminine, draws us to itself—towards the heights."

"Das Ewig-Weibliche  
Zieht uns hinan."

This ideal love is the foundation of being and the substance of ourselves. Hence, in spite of appearances, we are not strangers to one another. "Foolish one," said Victor Hugo, "who thinkest that I am not thou." In vain do the bodies, which are in space, oppose the impenetrability and discreteness of matter to our desire to think and feel in common. Even in this life, souls seek and find one another. Is it not a true saying of Uhland's, which Longfellow has thus translated :

"Yet, what binds us friend to friend,  
But that soul with soul can blend?"

This doctrine of a fundamental oneness of souls—of a principle of life, one, infinite, and perfect, in which we can unite, find one another, and attain each to his own most complete development, not at the expense of others, but in virtue of their very development—the principle which humanity calls God—this doctrine appears to us to be the end to which all the experiences and all the reflections of the mystics converge.

## III.

Such would be the general outlines of the subjective psychology of mysticism. The remarkable consistency of these ideas, the power they exercise over the minds and wills of men, unquestionably prove their interest and value. But we cannot refrain from asking how much would remain if they were to be considered, no longer from within, from the mystic's own point of view, but from without, from the point of view of the man of science, the impartial and indifferent observer of human nature. Do these miraculous objects to which the mystic devotes himself really exist, or are they but the products of his imagination, subjective projections of his states of soul? And is there, in these very states of the soul, anything special or superior, as the mystic thinks, or are they not simply varieties of ordinary and even morbid phenomena? To study these questions would be to embark upon the objective psychology of mysticism.

If the mystic himself were to be consulted on this point, I think it is a foregone conclusion that he would be on the side of the most uncompromising objectivity. For he on his own part professes that, seen from without, mystical phenomena do not exist as such—that they become significant only for the consciousness of the mystic, as expressions of that very life which is being developed in the depths of his soul. The mystic holds that faculties become active only for those who exercise them, and that there is a kind of knowledge which is a property of love. For him, therefore, who observes without loving, this knowledge is impossible.

To anyone who, taking a purely objective point of view, denied the reality of spiritual objects, the mystic would reply, as Faust to Mephistopheles: "In deinem Nichts hoff' ich das All zu finden": "It is in that which in thine eyes is nothing that I hope to find All."

Now it does indeed appear as if, from an external point of view, one would be forced to refer the phenomena of mysticism to two affections of the mind which seem scarcely compatible

with the reality of the objects of mysticism; namely, to auto-suggestion and mono-ideism.

The mystic's whole life is auto-suggestion. He himself knows it, and from this psychological process he adopts his method. He first of all presents to himself a certain idea, and then he employs all the means at his disposal to convert that idea into force, into feeling, into desire, into reality, inward and substantial. He suggests to himself that the earthly joys he once delighted in shall now become to him contemptible, and the spiritual joys infinite, which once had appeared empty. He is not satisfied until the idea, which at first was external, has incorporated itself in his soul and in his members.

And likewise this idea must, through its excellence, obliterate all other ideas in the mind of the mystic. He himself struggles to free his soul from all extraneous thoughts; and he feels himself at the end of his labors when at last, in ecstasy, one single idea stands without a rival, and occupies the whole field of his consciousness.

Considered objectively there is nothing more in the manifestations of mysticism than auto-suggestion and mono-ideism. Does this mean that these manifestations are to be considered as mere illusions of the individual, without reality or universal value? Such a conclusion would be too summary.

No doubt auto-suggestion and mono-ideism are often met with as special states, abnormal or pathological—but not always. The man of genius, too, is possessed by one idea, suggests to himself to find it great and beautiful, and ends by acting as it were automatically according to that idea. Nor is it only the man of genius, himself somewhat akin to the mystic, who offers examples of auto-suggestion and mono-ideism. These two phenomena are to be met with in every man of action, in all who devote themselves to some one cause, mission or task. I believe, indeed, that both of them are definite conditions of existence for every man who reflects. What is the good of living, of struggling, of taking pains, making efforts, if life has no value? And how be assured that our life has value, that the universe is interested in the ephemeral assemblage of atoms which constitutes our individu-

ality, unless auto-suggestion comes in to fill up the gaps of knowledge? I approve myself for holding to life, because I imagine that I am of some use. And is not the concentration of our faculties upon one idea, itself, in a general way, the condition, the very principle of action? It is in the degree in which they become exclusive that our ideas cease to be mere ideas, and, drawing to themselves the living forces of the soul, are transfigured into will and action.

Nothing, therefore, has been determined as to the absolute value of mysticism, by referring it to auto-suggestion and mono-ideism. All depends upon the value of the idea which the mystic presents to consciousness as its supreme and exclusive object. Is this idea the more or less symbolical expression of a reality, perhaps inaccessible, but recognizable in its powerful and beneficent results, like the idea of the divine, present and active, to which a Beethoven attributed his sublime creations; or must it be likened to the vain mirages in which sickly imaginations indulge?

The mystic idea, taken in its essential significance, certainly seems to belong to those which cannot be treated as simple states of the soul, altogether relative and subjective. The very fact that it exists, and has the characteristics we have noted; the fact that many men, some of them eminent, have been attached to it, and lived in it, lays upon psychology and philosophy the two following problems, among others:

In the first place, is there for us, as conscious beings, besides the individual life, a universal life, potential and already in some measure real? Is our reflective and individual consciousness, according to which we are external to one another, an absolute reality, or a simple phenomenon under which is concealed the universal interpenetration of souls within a unifying principle?

In the second place, if there are thus for us two existences, one developed and immediately visible, the individual existence; the other still almost unconscious, but greater, the universal existence; what is the relation between these two existences, and what method should we adopt in order to attain to the full realization of the second?

Many mystics hold to the way of asceticism; that is to say, they consider the two existences as mutually contradictory, and make the abolition of the one the condition of the development of the other. On such a theory no common life can come but through the destruction of individuals; no divine city except through the annihilation of the human and natural city.

Yet mysticism suggests the idea of another method. If even now the individual and selfish life is not the only one which exists in us; if already we are secretly united, one with the other, by our common participation in the life of the universal spirit, it is not possible to establish any incompatibility of the individual and the universal life. They are reconcilable, since, at bottom, in a certain measure, they are already reconciled. It would then be possible to transcend nature without going out of nature. Individual consciousnesses might, without breaking, enlarge their bounds, and mutually interpenetrate. And it would be given to humanity to become one without the necessary disappearance of individuals, of families, of nations, of any of those groups which already have a unity, and whose existence is beautiful and good. Pascal's idea would be realizable: "Unity and multiplicity; it is a mistake to exclude either."

If these reflections have any justifiable basis, it would seem that a broad and complete study of mysticism should not only be of interest from the point of view of curiosity, even the curiosity of science, but should also interest very directly the life and destiny of individuals and of humanity.

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